ASYMMETRIC INCENTIVES, RATIONAL IGNORANCE AND ADVERSE SELECTION OF ELITES

A model of expressive participation, political agency, and accumulated disappointment

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Abstract

This article proposes an integrated model of political behavior based on a fundamental asymmetry of incentives. For the individual voter, the probability of altering the electoral outcome through his or her vote is practically nil, so both voting and, especially, becoming rigorously informed may be instrumentally irrational. For the political representative, by contrast, a single decision may redistribute enormous quantities of resources, power, offices, and opportunities. The result is a paradoxical structure: those with the least individual capacity to influence outcomes also have the weakest incentives to acquire information, while those who concentrate decision-making capacity face intense incentives to maximize personal, partisan, or network interests.

The paper combines Downs's rational ignorance, Riker and Ordeshook's calculus of voting, the theory of expressive voting, Buchanan and Tullock's public choice, the principal-agent problem, rent seeking, and candidate selection within political organizations. It adds a component of adverse selection of elites: the set of skills that allows a person to rise within a political organization does not necessarily coincide with the set that enables good government. The paper also distinguishes selection from socialization: an organization may attract and promote certain profiles and then train them in the practices it rewards.

Finally, a dynamic participation function is incorporated. Voting can retain positive utility even when its instrumental effectiveness is negligible because it provides moral, expressive, identity-based, or habitual utility. Accumulated disappointment reduces that utility, but it competes with civic duty, habituation, and the declining relative cost of participation over the life cycle. This helps explain why political experience may generate cynicism without necessarily producing lower electoral participation.

Keywords: public choice; rational ignorance; paradox of voting; expressive voting; civic duty; principal-agent; rent seeking; political selection; oligarchy; elites; abstention; political disappointment.

1. Introduction: the strange rationality of a mass institution

Modern representative democracy rests on a minute gesture: one individual casts one vote among millions. Socially, the aggregate result may decide governments, budgets, taxes, wars, regulations, or redistributions of enormous magnitude. Individually, however, the causal capacity of each ballot is almost nonexistent. The collective importance of the election and the instrumental importance of the individual act therefore operate on radically different scales.

> *"If voting is already absurd, imagine becoming properly informed."*

The sentence is deliberately provocative, but it points to a real economic problem. "Absurd" here does not necessarily mean morally absurd or psychologically incomprehensible. It means that, under a strictly instrumental calculation, the expected return from the act is

extraordinarily small. The effort of traveling, waiting, deciding, and voting has a cost; the effort of understanding platforms, budgets, institutions, and political consequences has an even greater cost. Yet the probability that this effort will make the individual's vote decisive remains close to zero.

Public choice theory made it possible to address this problem without assuming that citizens, officials, or representatives change their nature when they enter the political sphere. If individuals in markets are assumed to respond to incentives, pursue objectives, and economize on information, there is no obvious reason to replace them in politics with omniscient and disinterested agents. The purpose of this article is to carry that intuition across three simultaneous levels: the citizen who votes, the representative who decides, and the organization that selects those who may decide.

The thesis is not that every voter is ignorant or that every politician is corrupt. It is more uncomfortable: institutions can generate predictable behavior without requiring either stupid citizens or initially wicked rulers. It is enough for costs, benefits, probabilities, and selection processes to be distributed unequally.

2. From homo politicus to the rational idiōtēs

2.1. A philological clarification that strengthens the paradox

The Greek word ἰδιώτης (idiōtēs) primarily referred to a private person, private citizen, or layperson, as opposed to a magistrate, public official, or specialist. It is not philologically exact simply to translate it as “someone who does not vote” or “someone who disengages from politics.” Athenian political culture could indeed censure those who did not participate in common affairs, but the modern identification of the idiōtēs with the political abstentionist is a later simplification.

Precisely for that reason, the conceptual inversion becomes more suggestive. Civic tradition tends to present the good citizen as someone concerned with the polis and the “idiot” as someone enclosed within private life. Public choice introduces an uncomfortable possibility: under certain institutional conditions, the citizen who remains relatively on the sidelines may be rationally economizing on a scarce resource - time. In this metaphorical sense, the idiōtēs may be rational.

2.2. The instrumental calculus of voting

In its simplest formulation, the expected instrumental utility of voting can be expressed as:

$$U(V) = pB - C$$

where p is the probability that the individual vote is decisive, B is the benefit the individual assigns to the victory of the preferred option, and C is the cost of participating. In large electorates, p is minuscule. Anthony Downs made this observation one of the central points of

the economic theory of democracy: the cost of acquiring political information can rationally exceed the expected benefit of using it in an individual decision whose marginal impact is almost nil (Downs, 1957).

There can be an enormous social political benefit and, at the same time, an expected private benefit close to zero. This divergence is essential. An election may decide the fate of hundreds of billions of euros without thereby giving the individual voter hundreds of billions of reasons to study the election. The voter's causal participation in the outcome remains approximately 1/N, modulated by the probability of a tie or near tie.

2.3. Becoming informed may be even “more irrational” than voting

Rational ignorance does not claim that ignorance is good. It claims that acquiring information is costly and that the private benefit of doing so may be small. If C_I represents the cost of information and ΔB the potential improvement in the individual's outcome derived from casting a better-informed vote, we may write:

$$U(I) = p\Delta B - C_I$$

Because p remains extremely small, a citizen may devote dozens of hours to studying politics without appreciably changing the expected outcome of an election. The radical phrase - “if voting is already absurd, imagine becoming properly informed” - can therefore be translated into analytical language: the greater the cognitive cost of reaching a high-quality opinion and the lower the probability that this opinion will have a causal effect, the lower the instrumental return to becoming informed.

This also helps explain why public debate may reward informational shortcuts, partisan identities, heuristics, slogans, or group signals. No assumption of mental incapacity is required. In many cases, spending time simultaneously mastering taxation, energy, defense, urban planning, pensions, and foreign policy would be a private investment that is difficult to justify.

3. Why we vote when voting almost never decides

3.1. From instrumental voting to voting as consumption

The preceding paradox would be devastating if voting had utility only through the outcome. Riker and Ordeshook, however, expanded the calculus of voting by incorporating benefits associated with the act of participation itself. In simplified notation:

$$U(V) = pB - C + D$$

The term D may include civic duty, moral satisfaction, attachment to the system, expression of a preference, participation in a collective ceremony, or the satisfaction of seeing oneself as a good citizen. If $D > C$, voting may be rational even when $pB \approx 0$.

> *“I fulfill my duty, I feel good about fulfilling my duty; therefore, I vote.”*

This formulation captures an important part of human behavior that a narrow interpretation of economic interest should not eliminate. People constantly perform actions that do not generate monetary income: they donate, help others, participate in associations, practice rituals, follow sports teams, or devote hours to hobbies. The benefit is the experience itself. In that sense, voting may be a moral or expressive consumption good, not merely an investment intended to produce a particular government.

3.2. Expressive voting and identity

Brennan and Lomasky developed an expressive theory of electoral preference. When the expected benefit of being decisive is almost nil, voters may use the vote to express who they are, what values they hold, or what community they wish to belong to. Political choice thus acquires features of symbolic expression. An individual may prefer to "say" something through the vote even while knowing that the ballot will not cause the outcome.

This introduces a profound difference between deciding individually and voting collectively. When buying a car, taking out a mortgage, or choosing a treatment, the individual bears a substantial share of the consequences of being wrong. In a mass election, the marginal causal cost of a mistaken preference is diluted among millions. Voting therefore permits individuals to consume convictions at a low individual price.

3.3. It may also be rational to become informed even when the information is not decisive

The same reasoning rescues political information from its apparent instrumental uselessness. If D_I represents the direct utility of being informed - curiosity, entertainment, epistemic self-esteem, civic identity, or aversion to "being ignorant" - then:

$$U(I) = p\Delta B - C_I + D_I$$

When D_I > C_I, becoming informed is rational even if pΔB is negligible. Someone who enjoys politics does not necessarily study it in order to change the electoral outcome; the person may study because understanding it yields utility. Rational ignorance therefore does not predict universal ignorance. It predicts heterogeneity: those with lower costs or higher intellectual-consumption benefits will become more informed.

4. The inversion of incentives: from voter to decision-maker

4.1. Two sides of the same democracy

The decisive point of the model appears when moving from the voter to the representative. The individual voter has very little causal capacity. A ruler, legislator, senior official, or regulator may have a great deal. An administrative decision, public tender, rezoning, subsidy, sectoral regulation, or budgetary decision may move millions of euros among groups.

> *"There is a huge pot. Millions are at stake. What you decide is worth millions. You see millions passing in front of you; of course you're going to want something."*

Taken literally, the sentence would be too deterministic: the fact that a person controls resources does not imply that he or she will necessarily appropriate them. Taken as an intuition about incentives, however, it is central to public choice. The greater the volume of politically allocable rents and the greater the decision-maker's discretion, the greater the potential value of influencing the decision, capturing a fraction of that rent, or exchanging it for present and future benefits.

4.2. No envelope of cash is required

The capture of political benefits should not be reduced to criminal corruption. A representative may maximize salary, continuation in office, prestige, power, appointment authority, networks, access, future professional prospects, influence over organizations, or reciprocities. Divergence between the representative's interest and the represented party's interest can exist without any crime being committed.

Schematically, the decision-maker's utility may be expressed as:

$$U(P) = S + W + R + F + K - qL$$

where S represents salary and career; W, power and status; R, appropriable or controllable rents; F, favors and reciprocities; K, future network benefits; q, the probability of sanction; and L, the loss associated with sanction. Not all terms need to be monetary. It is enough that the agent values them.

4.3. Rent seeking and concentration of benefits

Tullock and the subsequent literature on rent seeking showed that when public power can create or distribute rents, individuals and groups have incentives to spend resources in order to capture them. This introduces another asymmetry: the benefits of a policy may be highly concentrated in a small group while its costs are spread across millions of taxpayers or consumers.

For someone who can gain ten million from a regulation, spending one hundred thousand to influence it may be rational. For each citizen who will lose only a few euros, spending hours studying, organizing, and fighting it may not be. The potential result is a politics of intensely interested minorities and weakly attentive majorities.

5. The principal-agent problem: delegating to someone who has interests of their own

Political representation can be understood as a principal-agent relationship. Citizens delegate decision-making capacity to representatives because directly governing every issue would be prohibitively costly. But delegation creates a problem: the agent knows more about the process, controls information, and may have objectives of their own. Agency theory applied

to representation identifies precisely this possibility of "agency loss": voters lack sufficient information and resources to select, observe, and perfectly discipline their representatives.

> *"Elites put their own interests first, not those of the people they represent."*

As a universal proposition, the sentence is too strong: some people may sacrifice their own interests for convictions or public duty. As a modeling assumption, however, it is reasonable not to assume perfect altruism. The representative has an individual utility function. The institutional problem is to design mechanisms that make pursuing it compatible, as far as possible, with the principal's objectives.

Periodic elections are one such mechanism, but their disciplinary capacity is limited precisely by rational ignorance. A poorly informed principal supervises the agent less effectively. If public decisions are also numerous, technically complex, and their consequences appear with delay, assigning responsibility becomes costly.

6. Before corruption: who gets to the top

6.1. Politics does not select at random

Discussion of political incentives often begins when the representative already holds office. But there is an earlier stage: selection. Candidates are not a random sample of the population. First there must be self-selection - who wants to enter politics - and then organizational selection - who receives support, resources, internal posts, and ultimately a competitive candidacy. Parties are, among other things, mechanisms for recruiting and selecting elites.

> *"To become the political party's representative, you have to have done a lot of buddying up, alliances, betrayals."*

The wording is deliberately harsh, but it identifies a testable hypothesis. Rising within an organization requires specific competencies: building coalitions, winning trust, distributing information, maintaining loyalties, anticipating rivals' moves, negotiating, competing internally, and managing conflict. Some of these abilities are perfectly compatible with good government. Others may reward opportunistic behavior.

6.2. The S ≠ G problem[1]

Let S denote the vector of traits that maximizes survival and promotion within a political organization, and G the vector of traits that maximizes governing quality:

$$S = f(\text{alliances, loyalty, strategy, discipline, network, internal competition, information control, } \ldots)$$

$$G = f(\text{competence, integrity, judgment, knowledge, prudence, public orientation, } \ldots)$$

1S and G are paper-specific symbols: S denotes the vector of traits that maximizes survival and promotion within a political organization; G denotes the vector of traits that maximizes governing quality.

There is no logical necessity for S = G. In the best case they will be positively correlated. In other environments the correlation may be weak and, for certain characteristics, negative. A selection system may be excellent at producing internal winners and mediocre at producing administrators of the public interest.

This is the core of the adverse-selection-of-elites hypothesis. It does not claim that organizations consciously select "bad people." It claims that every structure rewards certain behaviors and that, over time, individuals who best master those behaviors will be overrepresented at the top.

6.3. The radical hypothesis: political psychopathy

> *"In the end, the most psychopathic get there, the most perverse, the ones who obviously will have no problem corrupting themselves."*

Taken literally, this thesis goes beyond what the general evidence allows us to assert. It cannot be maintained that political competition universally selects for clinical psychopathy or corruption. But it can be preserved as an extreme hypothesis that serves as a theoretical boundary: if an organization systematically rewarded lack of scruples, interpersonal manipulation, profitable betrayal, and the capacity to instrumentalize relationships, it would be reasonable to expect selection of profiles with greater tolerance for those behaviors.

The academically defensible version is therefore a trait-selection hypothesis: certain organizational architectures may grant competitive advantages to individuals more willing to engage in opportunism, strategic aggressiveness, or the instrumentalization of relationships. The magnitude and direction of this effect are empirical questions, not axioms.

7. Selection plus socialization: "they do not merely become corrupt; they arrive already trained"

> *"They do not merely end up becoming corrupt; they already know how it works; they already have practice at becoming corrupt."*

The intuition can be formalized by separating two mechanisms. The first is selection: certain characteristics increase the probability of promotion. The second is socialization: spending years inside the organization teaches which practices work and which are punished. Even an initially idealistic individual may progressively learn to survive in an environment that rewards concessions, silences, favors, discipline, or exchanges.

$$\text{Initial type} \rightarrow \text{selection} \rightarrow \text{socialization} \rightarrow \text{observed political type}$$

This distinction avoids the simplistic explanation that "power corrupts" suddenly. The politician who reaches the top may have been filtered for years and, simultaneously, shaped by years of organizational learning. When that person finally obtains the capacity to administer public resources, they do not arrive as a blank slate.

Michels anticipated part of this logic in his iron law of oligarchy: complex organizations require specialization, leadership, and control of information, which tends to consolidate an internal elite. The present model adds that this elite not only concentrates power; it is also the result of a competitive process of survival and learning.

8. A system of asymmetric incentives

The preceding elements can be brought together within a single architecture. The citizen has little marginal decision-making capacity and therefore little instrumental incentive to become informed. The politician has concentrated capacity and therefore intense incentives to preserve and use it. The party organization controls much of the access to that capacity and selects those who best survive within it.

The proposed causal chain is:

Low individual incentive to become informed

↓

Imperfect electoral supervision

↓

Greater discretion of the political agent

↓

High value of controlling decisions and rents

↓

Intense competition to gain access and remain

↓

Organizational selection + socialization

↓

Risk of divergence between political elite and represented citizens

The paradox is that the same decision has opposite marginal values depending on institutional position. For a citizen, spending twenty hours studying a one-hundred-million-euro policy may change nothing. For the person who signs or blocks that policy, twenty hours of negotiation may determine careers, alliances, and enormous resources.

9. Disappointment: when voting stops feeling like a duty and starts feeling like participation in a comedy

9.1. A dynamic participation function

> *"A moment comes when one may think: not only am I not fulfilling my duty by voting; I am participating in a comedy, in a circus."*

If the utility of voting comes partly from a moral or expressive term, that utility can depreciate. An individual who repeatedly interprets elected officials as breaking promises, betraying, lying, or using office for their own benefit may cease to associate voting with virtuous citizenship. The same gesture that once produced moral satisfaction may begin to produce disutility.

Let us propose:

$$U_t(V) = p_tB_t - C_t + M_t + E_t + H_t - \Delta_t$$

where M is moral or civic-duty utility; E, expressive and identity-based utility; H, habit; and Δ, disappointment or disutility derived from believing that the act legitimizes an undesirable system. Participation occurs if $U_t(V) > 0$.

Disappointment may accumulate:

$$\Delta_{t+1} = \rho\Delta_t + \delta_t$$

where δ_t represents new negative experiences and ρ the persistence of disenchantment. If Δ rises sufficiently, a person may move from voting out of duty to abstaining out of duty as well: abstention is no longer interpreted as indifference, but as rejection.

9.2. The apparent refutation: older people usually vote more

The simple accumulated-disappointment hypothesis generates an immediate prediction: more years of political exposure should imply greater disappointment and therefore lower participation. Yet electoral participation usually rises from youth through much of adulthood and falls only at advanced ages. This fact prevents accumulated disappointment from becoming the sole explanation.

But it does not make disappointment irrelevant. Other variables change simultaneously with age: voting may become habitual, administrative costs may fall, residential stability may rise, community integration may be greater, and certain cohorts may have been socialized under stronger civic norms. Thus:

$$dU/dA = -dC/dA + dM/dA + dE/dA + dH/dA - d\Delta/dA$$

That dU/dA is positive does not imply that dΔ/dA is zero. It means only that the positive forces outweigh net disappointment. A sixty-year-old may be far more disenchanted with politicians than at twenty and, at the same time, far more consistent about voting.

9.3. Age, habit, and cohort

Three mechanisms should be distinguished. The life-cycle effect describes changes associated with age and social stability. The experience effect describes learning generated by repeated participation. The cohort effect describes differences between generations socialized in different historical contexts. A generation taught that voting was an achievement, a moral obligation, or a symbol of democratic belonging may retain a high M even when its evaluation of political parties is negative.

Habit, in turn, may make participation partly automatic. Once voting forms part of the expected behavioral script every four years, the subjective cost of deciding whether to participate may decline. The citizen does not recalculate voting theory from scratch at every election; he or she simply "is a person who votes."

10. Gradualism, imitation, and normalization

Political decisions are not made in isolation either. Individuals observe the behavior of others and infer from it what is normal, proper, and expected. If voting is the standard behavior within the family, workplace, or community, part of the utility of voting comes from following a norm. If abstention becomes normalized, the moral cost of abstaining falls.

> *"People vote, so they vote. They do not ask themselves whether voting is rational or not."*

This observation introduces bounded rationality and habitual behavior. The economic model need not assume that every citizen explicitly calculates pB - C + D. Utility functions are analytical representations of forces that may operate as customs, emotions, internalized norms, or shortcuts. The fact that a behavior can be rationalized does not mean that the actor consciously performs the calculation.

Gradualism also matters for disappointment. Expectations may be lowered slowly. One broken promise may provoke outrage; ten broken promises may become "normal." Paradoxically, the system may produce cynicism and continuity at the same time: little is expected of politicians, but people continue to vote because voting remains part of the civic repertoire.

11. Testable hypotheses

The model is not intended to remain a rhetorical description. It generates several hypotheses that can be empirically tested:

- H1 - Rational ignorance: the greater the cost of acquiring political information and the lower the direct private benefit of possessing it, the lower the investment in information, ceteris paribus.[2]
- H2 - Information consumption: intrinsic interest in politics and civic identity will moderate H1; individuals with high D_I may be highly informed despite their low decision-making capacity.
- H3 - Intensity asymmetry: actors who receive concentrated benefits from a decision will invest more resources in influencing it than individuals who bear small and dispersed costs.
- H4 - Agency: divergence between voter and representative preferences will increase when decisions are less observable, responsibility is harder to attribute, and electoral sanction is less likely.
- H5 - Organizational selection: internal structures that strongly reward loyalty and network control over external performance will produce elites with a stronger intraparty orientation.
- H6 - Socialization: controlling for initial traits, more years of internal political career will be associated with greater adaptation to organizational norms and survival strategies.
- H7 - Disappointment: negative political experiences will reduce the moral component M and/or increase Δ, especially among individuals whose participation depended little on habit.
- H8 - Compensating habit: the negative effect of disappointment on voting will be smaller among voters with a long history of regular participation.
- H9 - Cohort: part of the higher participation of older people will be explained by generational differences in civic duty rather than by biological age alone.
- H10 - Moral abstention: for a fraction of the electorate, abstention will not express apathy but rather negative expressive utility from voting: refusal to legitimize a process perceived as fraudulent, irrelevant, or theatrical.

12. What the model does not claim

A theory of incentives can become caricatured if every tendency is turned into an absolute law. Its limits should therefore be made explicit.

- It does not claim that voting is “stupid.” It claims that its individual instrumental return may be minuscule; other benefits may make it rational.
- It does not claim that becoming informed is socially useless. It claims that there is an appropriability problem: the collective benefit of information may greatly exceed the private benefit to the person who acquires it.

2H denotes hypothesis. H1-H10 are internal labels for the ten testable hypotheses proposed in this paper.

- It does not claim that all politicians are corrupt. It claims that representatives have objectives of their own and that certain institutions may create opportunities for divergence and capture.
- It does not claim that “psychopaths” necessarily govern. That is the radical formulation of an adverse trait-selection hypothesis that must be tested.
- It does not claim that age generates cynicism or participation through a single pathway. Age, experience, habit, and cohort must be separated empirically.

These cautions do not weaken the argument. They strengthen it by making it possible to distinguish a falsifiable proposition from a political invective.

13. Institutional implications

If the problem is an asymmetry of incentives, the relevant reforms cannot be limited to exhorting citizens to “become more informed” or asking politicians to “be better.” A robust institution should function reasonably even when actors economize on information and pursue objectives of their own.

13.1. Reduce the cost of supervision

Useful transparency does not consist of publishing millions of pages that no one can process. It consists of making decisions attributable: who decided, how much it cost, who benefited, what alternatives existed, and what outcome followed. Reducing C_I increases the possibility of citizen and journalistic oversight.

13.2. Reduce high-value discretion

The more rents an authority can create or distribute at its discretion, the greater the potential reward from capturing them. General rules, competitive procedures, traceability, and separation of functions can reduce R and increase q.

13.3. Reform selection, not only elections

If citizens can choose only among candidates previously filtered by organizations, democratic quality also depends on how that filter operates. Rules for candidate selection, internal promotion, financing, professionalization, and intraparty competition are first-order institutional variables.

13.4. Design for the saint and the scoundrel

Good institutional design should not require saints. It should seek to ensure that even an ambitious politician finds it more profitable to produce verifiable results than to capture rents, and that even a citizen with little time can identify at least the major decisions and responsibilities. The issue is not to eliminate self-interest, but to channel it.

14. Discussion: democracy sustained by non-instrumental behavior

There is a final paradox. If all citizens were strictly instrumental agents and D were zero, the theory would struggle to explain high electoral participation. Mass democracy appears to depend partly on behaviors that do not pursue the marginal causal effect of the vote: duty, habit, identity, expression, and ritual.

This means that an institution formally designed to aggregate instrumental preferences may be sustained by non-instrumental motivations. The voter participates because "that is what one does," because participation is regarded as a duty, or because the voter wishes to express who he or she is. The system survives, in part, because millions of people accept a small private cost without expecting their individual gesture to determine the outcome.

But this same structure lowers the private price of being wrong. If my vote will not be decisive, I can afford to vote expressively, identitarily, or while poorly informed without expecting personally to bear the marginal consequence of that error. Democracy draws participation from expressive motivations and, simultaneously, may suffer some of their epistemic costs.

15. Conclusion

> *"The paradox is not only that it can be rational to ignore politics. It is that those who can influence it least have little incentive to understand it, while those who can influence it have enormous incentives to appropriate the benefits of that influence."*

The model developed in this article brings together within a single structure four problems that are often studied separately. First, the individual voter has a weak instrumental incentive to vote and an even weaker incentive to acquire costly information. Second, this apparent absurdity disappears when voting and information generate moral, expressive, or identity-based utility. Third, the representative occupies the opposite position: he or she controls high-value decisions and has intense incentives to preserve power, career, networks, and rents. Fourth, those who reach that position are not selected at random, but through organizations that reward certain competencies and socialize those who survive.

Political disappointment adds a temporal dimension. The citizen may begin by voting because it is considered a duty and end by interpreting the same gesture as participation in a comedy. Yet negative experience does not act alone. It competes with habit, norm, integration, and generational socialization. A society can therefore become more cynical without becoming proportionally more abstentionist.

The methodological consequence is simple: to understand politics it is not enough to ask what policies citizens want or what ideology rulers proclaim. We must study what is worth knowing, what is worth monitoring, who has real capacity to decide, who benefits from each decision, and what kind of person manages to survive the process that leads to that position.

The political "idiot," understood metaphorically as the person who retreats into private life, may be rational. The institutional problem begins when that individual rationality coexists with elites subject to exactly opposite incentives.

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